

Huff and Stauffacher, correspondence

from S [SFMA] to H [NYC] dtd 11 Mar 49

envelope 15 Mar 49

handwritten, transcribed by Chuck Kleinhans, 1990 from Theodore Huff papers in George Eastman House archives

Dear Ted--

I've been away, left right after the 18th showing, but that was not the reason for my not writing sooner. Mainly it was because I didn't know exactly what to write, in view of the fact we didn't show The Stone Children as scheduled. I was embarrassed because of all the writing and mailing to get it here, and then not showing it.

If we are going to continue "Art In Cinema," we will have to get a non-involved group to act as a screening board; I don't want to take the rap for editing the programs anymore. I get it from all sides, all the time. Certainly I have no axe to grind, and certainly Art In Cinema doesn't set itself up as a judge of experimental films, as such. I have only tried to keep it on the general level that it originally started with, and the films that we try to show constitute a direction, a certain standard of attitude toward the film medium. A lot of the things we've shown have laid eggs, believe me. I get criticized severely for including them on Art In Cinema. I get criticized by the film makers themselves because their own work flopped on the screen--"it wasn't presented properly," etc. A case in point was "The Petrified Dog." It was not well liked. Peterson accused me of sabotage because the "sound wasn't loud enough." It flopped, and he resents me because I am available to resent. He forgets that he was in the projection booth himself, controlling the sound. "Mother's Day" was well liked here, and at Mills College. (I understand it was not liked in N.Y.) The fact that it was a local product may have had something to do with it. Its humor, in contrast to "Petrified Dog's" violent insultingly nasty contents may have had something to do with it. Personally, M.D. is not my idea of a film, but it seemed to me to have more than several levels of content and meaning and the story on the surface acted as a symbolic theme to what was really trying to be said. It was told pictorially, the burden of the communication was carried by the pictorial elements--symbols, if you wish--and not the acting. I am not defending "Mother's Day" because I was involved in photographing it. I am trying to

point out why The Stone Children was not shown, and why "Mother's Day" was--a thing that you probably and violently disagree with.

It seems to me that when a film depends upon the acting of an individual in it (or group of individuals), rather than the camera, to convey the meaning, it is then an actor's film, not the camera's. It is a performance, and it must stand or fall on the performing--the acting. In this, the professionals can beat us every time. If we take a theme, or story, involving a protagonist who is followed through a series events of a kind such a murder, chase, sex--all the factors that are present in a majority of regulation Hollywood films, and if the camera is acting as a spectator to these happenings--showing the protagonists, and what takes place--then the hero of the piece has got to be damn convincing; no amount of cutting, montage, angles, etc. can help an unconvincing performance. The protagonist asks you to look at him, and follow him through his adventures and emotions. You can be very sure that the audience, then, will want a convincing act and will judge it according to the best standards of acting anywhere. But this is not the case in the kind of experimental films that Art In Cinema has tied to stress. Even in such focus-on-one-person's-face films as Deren's, the person is form moving; --they are the camera's invention and the camera's eloquence--or at least they try to be. You cannot say Deren tries to "act" I have yet to hear anyone discuss her acting. One doesn't look for acting here. It is not the important ingredient.

I want to repeat--I certainly have no axe to grind, and most certainly have tried to remain non-partisan, non-ideological and impersonal in putting on A. in C. You will, perhaps, disagree with what I have to say. Please discuss it with me. I may be wrong.

No one has any criticism of The Stone Children's camerawork. The cutting is superb. The movement is wonderful, and the people who did see it liked all of these qualities. But I felt, and they all felt that it was an actor's film, and the actor, quite unconvincing. In the absence of sound (or I should say, speech) time and again the player, or players, unconsciously resort to clichés of movement that one has seen in the most ordinary old-time silent pictures. It struck me that your other picture--The Uncomfortable Man had so much more punch, so much more dynamic, moving cinematic qualities. It was much more mature. It gripped the audience, and they followed the picture through with

absorbition--the very wild and quite wonderful end, with its documentary shots of New Year's Eve. The good qualities of the film were not the acting, but everything else, which was powerful enough to make the picture, to my mind, a real experiential film. But to concentrate "The Stone Children" on the protagonist's face, which must carry the film, and the emotion expressed being a kind of mute, surly antagonism throughout is not experimenting with the film medium, to my mind--no matter what shots and what cutting is present also. I want you to discuss this with me. It is what I think, and also what the few others who saw it more or less think. I kept the film for awhile in order to look at it again with other people because I was upset about the whole thing, and have wanted to do my level best to be fair.

Please do not feel resentful with me on this account but write me whether or not you feel my criticism valid. I've got no other interest except trying to see good experimental films put on the screen at the Museum, and I'm not going about this task with any sort of a chip on my shoulder. We'll pay you a rental. I feel terrible in view of your having to rush the print through, etc. and that is why it has taken me a delay to write you. It's a good film, but the acting was all too unconvincing. No one for a moment could believe that these things were actually happening to the hero. And that is what the film asks you to believe.

If this diatribe of mine seems excessively unfair--please let me know what you think.

Most sincerely yours,
Frank Stauffacher
March 11/49

1160 words